

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y3
Evensong 22 Confession of St. Peter (Readings for St Peter and St Paul) & 3 Easter C
Thursday 18 January 2018

Ezekiel 34:11-16
John 21:15-22

Do You Love Me?

“Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’” (Jn. 21).

1. How hard it is to really know another person. Perhaps this is especially difficult because so much of our life seems to be an exercise in subtly asking what other people think of us. Many of our interactions can be boiled down to a simple question, “do you like me?”¹

On his first day of seventh grade my father’s teacher asked him what he wanted to be called. The teacher thought my dad would say “Stephen, Steve or Stevie.” Instead my father said, “I’d like to be called ‘Ace Sir.’” For the rest of the year that teacher addressed him as Ace. Oftentimes this was confusing for my father since no one else had ever called him Ace before.

What I like about this story is the way it reminds us that we are always making decisions about what self it is that we are sharing with others. The way we present ourselves may have very little to do with who we really are. Furthermore the self we show others may be unrecognizable to us.

Of all Jesus’ friends the one who had the biggest “Self” had to be Peter. Peter wasn’t even really his name. He was Simon son of John but the disciples referred to him as Peter which means “the Rock.”

Peter tried to give the world a very definite and exaggerated picture of himself. He wanted to be known as the one who was most zealous, most bold. He wanted to say the most extreme things, take the most pronounced risks, to be first in all things, to walk on water. He wanted them to believe that he would be faithful to the end.

As this conversation unfolds Jesus knows that this picture that Peter wants the world to have, this image that he mostly believes himself, is about to be utterly wiped away. Later when Jesus is arrested Peter, the one who promised always to be faithful, denies him three times. Three times he says about his friend, “I do not know the man.”

But in this conversation Jesus asks Peter “do you love me?” three times and then repeats the same words “feed my sheep.” Finally, in an astonishing moment the narrator of the

¹ “Is it possible, finally, for one human being to achieve perfect understanding of another? We can invest enormous time and energy in serious efforts another person, but in the end, how close are we able to come to that person’s essence? We convince ourselves that we know the other person well, but do we really know anything important about anyone?” Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles* tr. Jay Rubin (NY: Vintage, 1997) 24.

story tells us that Peter felt hurt (Jn. 21). It may be one of the only times that a gospel describes the inner feelings of Jesus' disciples in this way.

I think that Jesus is preparing Peter for the terrible moment when everything is stripped away from him, for that time when all that he said and believed about himself will be shown to be a lie.

2. How hard it is to really know another person. In October of 1990 I received a phone call from my one of my best friends. I was planning to ask Heidi to marry me and he tried to convince me not to. He said, "how do you know that she is the one?" He had a good point. I was on the verge of a monumental decision and all I had to offer him were inadequate words about how deeply I loved her. I had that and this sense she was more important to me than what I might look like to the world.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) writes about a group of porcupines on a winter night. They want to huddle together for warmth but they inevitably puncture each other with their spines.² For me this describes the human experience. We huddle and hurt each other. We long for intimacy and separation. Because of this we need to remind people that we love them.

On that day Jesus gave Peter two things. First Jesus showed Peter what to do when everything else was taken away, when all the stories Peter told about himself unraveled. Jesus teaches him to worry less about what the world thinks about him and more about how he cares for others. Tend my sheep.

Second Jesus gave him the chance to speak about his love. For each time that Peter denied him later, Jesus gave him the chance to almost redeem himself in advance by expressing his deep love for Jesus.

This week we have a chance to step out of the story we tell about ourselves and into the adventure of taking care of the people around us. Although we know that we will hurt the people in our life. We also have the opportunity to tell them that we love them. Let us do this in the confidence and strength of God's love for us.

² Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* tr. R.J. Hollingdale (NY: Penguin,)